

THE SIGN AT SIX

STEWART EDWARD WHITE,
AUTHOR OF
THE BLAZED TRAIL,
THE CONJUROR'S HOUSE, ETC., ETC.

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Percy Darrow, a young scientist in search of a job enters the office of "Boss" McCarthy at New York. McCarthy has just been threatened by an anonymous message ordering him to flee to Europe. He does not take the message seriously.

CHAPTER II.—Darrow goes up the elevator to visit Dr. Knox. Suddenly the electric apparatus in the Atlas building goes out of business. Experts are unable to locate the trouble.

CHAPTER III.—All at once, without apparent reason, electric connections are restored. The next evening McCarthy is warned that unless he leaves at once for Europe a sign will be sent him at six. Promptly at that hour the entire electric apparatus of New York is cut off and the city is thrown into a panic.

CHAPTER IV.—Percy Darrow thinks he has a clue.

CHAPTER V.—He engages the help of Jack Warford, a college athlete.

CHAPTER VI.—They visit McCarthy and offer to run down the cause of his mysterious trouble. McCarthy has just received another warning by wireless.

CHAPTER VII.—At six a deathly stillness falls on the city. Darrow and Warford are all sound. Darrow is distressed as he leaves the building.

CHAPTER VIII.—He is undisturbed because he believes he is on the right track and that another portent will appear at six.

CHAPTER IX.—This time the whole town is thrown into darkness and all hearing apparatus. Under cover of the confusion Darrow escapes from jail.

CHAPTER X.—The city is prostrated with fear.

CHAPTER XI.—The next morning Darrow and Warford go to McCarthy's office just as the latter gets another warning. Darkness hits the Atlas building in broad daylight.

CHAPTER XII.—Prof. Eldridge, the noted scientist, becomes interested in the phenomena. Darrow's theory is that the man who is sending the warnings has discovered some force by which he can cut through the vibrations of electricity, light and sound. McCarthy has disappeared. Darrow makes the boast that he will solve the secret before Eldridge dies.

CHAPTER XIII.—Darrow places Eldridge in possession of all the facts in the case and of his own theories in relation thereto and challenges him to solve the mystery.

CHAPTER XIV.—More terrifying messages come. Darrow, through the newspapers, reassures the people. He fears the Unknown will stop the vibrations of heat which would mean complete annihilation of all life, animal and vegetable.

CHAPTER XV.—The Unknown threatens to wipe out the city. Thousands of people flee.

CHAPTER XVI.—Eldridge receives financial backing from the moneyed interests to help in solving the mystery. Darrow, also, receives backing from wireless messages in McCarthy's office while Eldridge experiments with the purpose of locating the Unknown.

CHAPTER XVII.—Eldridge's experiments fail.

CHAPTER XVIII.—The city is thrown again into a panic and everyone is trying to escape.

CHAPTER XIX.—Darrow continues to keep vigil in McCarthy's office, but does nothing.

CHAPTER XX.—The mayor and some of his cohorts are found dead in the city hall, while in the midst of a crooked deal.

CHAPTER XXI.—A message from the Unknown threatens death to all in three hours. Darrow declares the time is not has come. A reign of terror prevails in the city. Eldridge admits to the committee of capitalists that he has failed. Darrow brings into the office an insane old man whom he introduces as the Unknown.

CHAPTER XXII.—When three hours before Darrow had announced that it was time to act he had gone into the office next to McCarthy's and after a desperate struggle had overcome the maniac, whom he had previously located, and destroyed his apparatus.

CHAPTER XXIII.—Darrow explains how he ran the maniac to earth.

CHAPTER XXIV.—McCarthy returns but never regains his political power. Darrow receives a large reward for his work.

"There's an awful lot of country—some of it pretty wild," objected the Bulletin man. "It will be a long job to hunt a man down in that territory."

"Even if it were as extensive as a busy review of the facts might indicate," stated Eldridge, "I venture to assert that enough men would be forthcoming to expedite such a search. But modifying circumstances will lighten the task."

"How's that?" asked the Bulletin man, speaking for the others' evident interest.

"We have no means of surmising the method by which this man succeeds in arresting vibratory motions of certain wave-lengths," said Eldridge didactically, "any more than we are able to define the precise nature of electricity. But, as in the case of electricity, we can observe the action of its phenomena. Two salient features leap out at us: one is that these phenomena are limited in time; the other that they are limited in space. The latter aspect we will examine, if you please, gentlemen."

"The phenomena have been directed with great accuracy (a) at the Atlas Building; (b) at this city and some of its immediate suburbs. The peculiarity of this can not but strike an observant mind. How is this man able, at forty or fifty miles distance, to concentrate his efforts on one comparatively small objective? We can only

surmise some system of insulating screens or focal mirrors. I might remark in passing that the existence of this power to direct or focus the more rapid ethereal vibrations would be a discovery of considerable scientific moment. But if this is the method employed, why do we not cut a band of vibratory nullifications, rather than touch upon a focal point?"

"Repeat softly," murmured the irrepresible Register man.

"Why," explained Eldridge patiently, "are not the people and buildings between here and the unknown operator affected? The only hypothesis we are justified in working upon is that the man's apparatus is at a height sufficient to carry over intervening obstacles. This hypothesis is strengthened by the collateral fact that the territory we have just determined as that within which he must be found lies in the highlands of our own and neighboring states. We may, therefore, eliminate the low-lying districts within our radius."

Percy Darrow opened one eye.

"Perhaps he's up in a balloon," he drawled languidly; "better take along an aeroplane."

Eldridge cast him a look of cold scorn; Darrow closed one eye.

CHAPTER XVII.

Drawing the Net.

The "zone of danger," as the Bulletin named it, was immediately the scene of swarming activities. Besides the expedition immediately despatched by the interests backing the investigation, several enterprising newspapers saw a fine chance for a big scoop, and sent out much-heralded parties of their own. The activities of these were well reported, you may be sure. Public interest was at once focused reassuringly on the chances of finding the annoying malefactor today or tomorrow; there no longer existed a doubt that he would be found. The weight of dread was lifted, and in the reaction people made light of the inconveniences and fun of the menacing messages that now came in by the dozen.

It was necessary to take extraordinary precautions against thieves and fire; the people took them. It was needed to slacken business in order that the congestion of the rush hour might not again prove tragic; business was slackened. People were willing to undergo many things, because, after all, they were but temporary. The madman of the Catskills would sooner or later be found; his pernicious activities brought to a conclusion. The country to be searched was tremendous, of course, but the search was thorough.

The public delivered itself joyously to a debauch of rumors and of "extras." The insistent alarms of danger, trickling in slowly from the outside world, dried up in the warmth of optimism. Only the more thoughtful, to a few of whom these warnings came, coupled them with Monsieur X's repeated threats, and walked uncertainly and in humility.

Percy Darrow did not interest himself in the search, nor did he desert his post in the wireless office. There he did nothing whatever. Jack Warford stayed with him, but immensely bored, it must be confessed. Once he suggested that if Darrow had nothing for him to do that afternoon, he thought he would like to go out for a little exercise.

Darrow shook his head.

"You may go, if you want to, Jack," said he, "but if you do I'll have to get some one else. This isn't much of a job, but I may need you any moment."

"All right," agreed Jack cheerfully. "Only I wish you'd let a fellow know what to expect."

Darrow shook his head. The two now practically lived in the office. Net they had taken his clothes off for several days. They slept in their chairs or on the lounge. Darrow read the various messages from the Unknown, glanced over the newspapers, and dozed.

Thus there passed two days of the search. On the third day the intermittent phenomena and the messages suddenly ceased. This fact was hailed jubilantly by all the papers as indicating that at last the quarry had become alarmed by the near-coming search. From the contracted district still remaining to be combed over, nobody was permitted to depart; and so closely was the cordon drawn by so large a posse that it was physically impossible for any living being to slip by the line.

Thus even if Monsieur X, convinced that at last his discovery was imminent, should destroy his apparatus or attempt to move it and himself to a place of safety, he would find his escape cut off. Thousands of men were employed, and thousands more drafted in as volunteers to render this out come assured.

It was an army deployed in an irregular circle, and moving inward toward its center. Men of the highest executive ability commanded it, saw to its necessary details, eliminated all possibility of a confusion through which any man could slip. The occasion was serious, and it was taken seriously.

Of the outcome no one in touch with the situation had a moment's doubt. The messages and the phenomena had continued to come from the danger zone. It was of course evident that they could not have been sent from any portion of the zone actually searched and occupied by the searchers. The remaining portion of the zone, from which they were still coming, had been completely surrounded. After that the manifestation had ceased. Therefore, Monsieur X must be within the beleaguered circle. To add to the probabilities, as Eldridge pointed out, the remaining district compressed the highest hills in the zone—a fact on all fours with his hypothesis.

On the appointed morning the army moved toward the center. Men beat



Men Beat the Ground Carefully.

the ground carefully, so close to one another that they could touch hands. As they closed in the ranks became thicker. Animals of many kinds, confused as the ranks closed in on them, tried to break through the cordon and were killed. Captains held order in the front row, that the army might not become a crowd. Birds, alarmed by the shouting, rose and wheeled.

In the city immense crowds watched the bulletins sent momentarily from the very field itself by private wires strung hastily for the occasion. Enterprising journals had prepared huge rough maps, on which the contracting circle was indicated by red lines, constantly redrawn. It was discovery before a multitude. The imagination of the public, fired by its realization of this fact, stretched itself ahead of the distant beaters, bodying forth what they might find.

As the circle narrowed excitement grew. All business ceased. The streets were crowded; the windows of the buildings looking out on the numerous bulletin-boards were black with heads. Those who could not sit demanded eagerly of those who could.

In the Atlas Building the wireless operator hung out of his window. Beside him was Jack Warford.

Darrow declined to join him. "You tell me," said he.

Jack therefore reported back over his shoulder the bulletins as they appeared. The crowds below read them, their faces upturned. One ran:

"Cordon now has surrounded the great circle knob. Station of Monsieur X determined among oak-trees. Men halted. Picked company surrounds."

The crowd roared its appreciation and impatience. A long pause followed. Then came the next bulletin.

"Search, discovers nothing."

A puzzled angry murmur arose, confused and chopped, like cross currents in a tidalway. Finally this was hung out:

"No traces of human occupancy."

A moment's astonished pause ensued. Then, over the vast multitude, its faces upturned in incredulous amazement, over the city lying sparkling in the noonday sun fell the pall of absolute darkness.

In the wireless office of the Atlas Building Percy Darrow laughed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Confusion Worse Confounded.

The absolute failure of Eldridge's hypothesis immediately threw public confidence into a profound reaction. Certainty gave place to complete distrust. Rumor gained ground. The exodus increased. Where formerly only those who could do so without great sacrifice or inconvenience had left town, now people were beginning to cut loose at any cost. Men resigned their positions in order to get their families away; others began to arrange their affairs as best they might, as though for a long vacation. As yet panic had not appeared openly in the light of day, but she lurked in the shadows of men's hearts.

The railroads and steamboats were crowded beyond their capacity. Extra trains followed one another as close together as the block signals would allow them to run. Humanity packed the cars. It was like a continual series of football days. In three of them it was estimated that two hundred thousand people had left Manhattan. It would have been physically impossible for the transportation lines to have

carried a thousand more. They had reached their capacity; the spigot was wide open.

Percy Darrow showed Jack the headlines to this effect.

"Cheerful thought," he suggested. "Suppose the whole four million should want to get out at the same time!"

Eldridge had come back to the wireless office thoroughly bewildered. It is a well-known fact that the exact scientist is the hardest man to fool, but the most fooled if fooled at all. Witness the extent to which noted scientists have been taken in by faking spiritualist mediums. So with Eldridge. His hypothesis had been so carefully worked out that the failure of its logic threw his mind into confusion. Until he could discover the weak link in his chain of reasoning, that confusion must continue.

An hour and a half after the bulletin announcing the failure of the search had been posted, Eldridge rushed into the wireless office. The plague of darkness had lifted after fifteen minutes' duration.

"Call Monsieur X," he gasped to the day operator. In fifteen minutes, by rapid substitutions of batteries to weaken or strengthen the sending current, he had re-determined his previous data. Apparently, without the shadow of a doubt, Monsieur X was within the circle.

"He may be at sea," suggested the operator.

But Eldridge shook his head. The circle of the sea had been well patrolled, and for days.

"Begin all over again," drawled Darrow. "I told you that you were on the wrong track."

Eldridge glanced at him.

"I can't say that you've done much!" said he tartly.

"No?" queried Darrow, with one of his slow and exasperating smiles. "Perhaps not. But you'd better get to thinking. You won't be able always to take things easy. You may have to hustle before long."

"There has been, I admit," said Eldridge stiffly, repeating in substance the interview he had already given out, "some flaw in our chain of reasoning. This it will be necessary to review with the object of revision. Every physical manifestation must have some physical and definite cause; and this can be found if time enough is bestowed on it. Often the process of elimination is the only method by which the truth can be determined."

Darrow chuckled.

"Look out the process of elimination doesn't overtake you," he remarked.

Eldridge detailed the same reasoning, at greater length, to the men who had employed him. These were very impatient. Business was being not merely impeded, but destroyed. Their customers had no time for them; their employees were in many cases leaving their jobs. They called in all the help they could to assist Eldridge's speculations, but in the end they had to fall back on the scientist as the best on the market. The case was not left in his hands alone, however. After a meeting they offered a reward to any one discovering and putting to an end the disconcerting phenomena.

"Here's where we make money, Jack, big money," observed Darrow when he read this offer. "It'll be big before we get through. You and I can have the little expedition to Volcano Island."

"Nothing suits me better," said Jack. "Are you sure we'll get it?"

"Sure," said Darrow.

Monsieur X had of course honored the waiting world with a message. It followed the fifteen minutes of darkness:

"To the People: I have been patient and have stayed my hand in order that you may learn the vanity of your endeavor. Who are ye that ye shall strive to take me? Vanity and foolishness is your portion. Now ye know my power and ye will listen unto my words as to the words of the master. Ye must hunt down this man McCarthy and deliver him over unto me. If every one of you gives himself to the task, lo! it is quickly done. Bestir yourselves against the wrath to come!"

These events occupied the three days of the ordered exodus. The time was further filled with rumor that ever grew more dire. Gradually business was suspended entirely. Those who could not or would not go away stood about talking matters over, and, as is always the case, matters did not improve in the telling. The only activity in the city was that bent on seeking out the abiding place of Monsieur X.

Eldridge had now come to the conclusion that he had perhaps been mistaken in confining his efforts to so small an area. In fact, further experiments rendered hazy the arbitrary outlines formerly determined for the zone of danger. At times Monsieur X answered well within the forty-five-mile mark; at times somewhat beyond the end of the fifty-mile radius. Eldridge immediately undertook a series of more delicate experiments by means of indicators especially designed by him for the occasion. Once more the little wireless office became the focus of reportorial attention.

"Our major premises we find still to be correct," announced Eldridge in the coldly didactic manner characteristic of the man. "This unknown operator is at a distance; and probably at a height. One indication we did not take sufficiently into consideration—the fact that this instrument alone is capable of communication with the instrument of this individual."

Percy Darrow for the first time began to show signs of attention. He dropped the legs of his chair to the floor and leaned forward.

"That would indicate, gentlemen, that the instrument whose location we are desirous of determining is of a peculiar nature. What that nature is we have no means of determining as

curiously; but in conjunction with the fact that our previous experiments failed to locate Monsieur X, we may adopt the hypothesis that the wireless apparatus of that individual is not so delicately responsive as the average. In other words, the zone within which he may be found is in fact wider than we had supposed."

Darrow leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. Eldridge continued, explaining the means he had taken to determine more accurately the exact location of Monsieur X.

CHAPTER XIX.

Percy Keeps Vigil.

The morning of the third day after the failure of the search, and of the sixth since McCarthy's disappearance, had arrived. During that time Percy Darrow, apparently insensible to fatigue, had maintained an almost sleepless vigil. His meals Jack Warford brought in to him; he dozed in his chair or on the couch. Never did he appear to do anything.

The very persistent quietude of the man ended by making its impression. To all questions, however, Darrow returned but the one reply, delivered always in a voice full of rally:

"I couldn't bear to miss a single step of Eldridge's masterly work."

About half past nine in the morning in question, through the door to the wireless office, always half opened, somebody looked hesitatingly into the room. Instantly Darrow and Jack were on their feet and in the hallway.

"Helen!" cried Jack.

"What is it? Anything happened?" demanded Darrow.

She surveyed them both anxiously.

"You certainly look like a frowzy tramp, Jack," she told her brother judiciously, "and you need sleep," she informed Darrow.

The young scientist bowed ironically, his long lashes drooping over his eyes in his accustomed lazy fashion as he realized that the occasion was not urgent. Helen turned directly to him.

"When are you going to stop this?" she demanded.

Darrow raised his eyebrows.

"You needn't look at me like that. You said you could lay your hands on Monsieur X at any moment; why don't you do it?"

"Eldridge is too amusing,"

"Too amusing?" echoed the girl.

"All you think of is yourself."

"Is it?" drawled Darrow.

"Have you been out in the city? Have you seen the people? Have you seen men out of work? Families leaving their homes? Panic spreading slowly but surely over a whole city?"

"Those pleasures have been denied me," said Darrow blandly.

The girl looked at him with bright angry eyes. Her cheeks were glowing, and her whole figure expressed a tense vibrant life in singular contrast to the apparent indolence of the man at whom she was talking.

"You are insufferable!" She fairly stamped her foot in vexation. "You are an egoist! You would play with the welfare of four million people to gratify your little personal desire for getting even!"

"Steady, sis!" warned Jack.

Darrow had straightened, and his indolent manner had fallen from him.

"I have said I would permit no harm to come to these people, and I mean it," said he.

"No harm!" cried Helen. "What do you call this?"

Darrow turned to the window looking out over the city.

"This!" he said. "Why, this isn't harm! There isn't a man out there who is not better off for what has happened to him. He has lost a little time, a little money, a little sleep, and he has been given a new point of view, a new standpoint. As a city dweller he was becoming a mouluk, a creature that could not exist without



He Stumbled to the Young Man and Clung to His Neck.

its shell. The city transported him, warmed him, fed him, amused him, protected him. He had nothing to do with it any way; he didn't even know how it was done. Deprived of his push-buttons, he was as helpless as a baby. Beyond the little stunt he did in his office or his store, and beyond the ability to cross a crowded street, he was no good. He not only didn't know how to do things, but he was rapidly losing, through disuse, the power to learn how to do things."

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